

risky behaviors or environmental exposures. Many of the self-care strategies employed by Latinos in response to symptoms are not based on any scientific evidence and are supported only by cultural beliefs and folk remedies from other parts of the world. Some are based on very different causal frameworks used to explain the nature of human disease and the prospects for cure. US health care professionals who attempt to treat Latinos in times of ill health may or may not know about the countervailing influence of these cultural phenomena. This can lead to additional health risks or treatment ineffectiveness.

As noted previously (Chapter 3), Latinos may rely on traditional and folk healers, may not understand how to access or use the US health system, and may have different cultural expectations about the provision of health services. The Task Force has concluded that any attempt to intervene within the Latino community in the interest of population-based health improvement or increasing health care access should start from an understanding of these social and cultural factors pertinent to the Latino community.<sup>8</sup> Any meaningful and effective approach should therefore seek to build upon the strong family values and connections within the Latino community, recognize the cultural beliefs associated with health and illness within this community, seek to identify and work with indigenous persons and informal networks within the Latino community who are trusted and readily available sources of health advice, and address the problems of communication and understanding that may arise in conventional health care encounters between Latino immigrant populations and US health care providers.

Among the strategies for addressing these issues considered by the Task Force was the use of trained Lay Health Advisors, indigenous community members who are trusted sources of health and health care information and who can facilitate both access to care and understanding of health and illness symptoms and medical care advice received from professional health care providers. Lay Health Advisors work directly with individuals to provide health education, inform them about the peculiarities of the US health care system and how to access needed health services, and help link individuals to community resources. Lay Health Advisors can also help strengthen the capacity of Latino families to manage the consequences of illness and take positive steps to promote personal health status within the Latino community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In its consideration of these social and cultural factors influencing the health behaviors and attitudes of Latinos, the NC IOM Latino Health Task Force offers the following recommendations intended to promote the positive health outcomes of Latinos now resident in North Carolina. The Task Force recommended that:

- 29. The NC Community College system (Adult Literacy) take positive steps to address the problem of low literacy, including health literacy, among its Latino population. There is a need for a statewide initiative to address this problem across all population groups (not limited to Latinos).**